

Already

TAEMIN - Already

—"You came to me like a dream, you were like a warm breath to me

You didn't have a reason, you were always like that back then."

William

Time moves differently when you're waiting for something you're terrified of.

The morning light filtered through my curtains like an accusation. I lay still beneath sheets that smelled of lavender fabric softener—Lego had washed them three days ago, insisting that I needed "fresh energy" for the days ahead. The gesture had been so earnest, so hopeful, that I hadn't had the heart to tell him that no amount of lavender could wash away the particular dread that had taken up residence in my chest.

The exhibition opened in four days.

Four days.

Ninety-six hours until strangers would stand in front of my grief and try to find meaning in it. Until critics would analyze the brushstrokes of my breakdown, assign artistic intent to what had been pure desperation. Until I would have to exist in public, in my body, in a room full of people who had been waiting three years to see if the "reclusive genius" was as fragile as they suspected.

I turned my head to check the clock on my nightstand. 8:47 AM. My therapy session with Dr. Chaisri was at 10:00. Two hours to convince myself to get out of bed. The ceiling above me was familiar—I'd spent countless hours studying its imperfections, the hairline crack near the corner that spider-webbed every time the building settled. During the worst of my isolation, that crack had felt like a companion. Something else that was slowly breaking, quietly, where no one could see.

I made myself sit up.

The apartment was quiet in the way it always was—the particular silence of a space designed for one person who rarely spoke. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, Bangkok spread out beneath me like a map of lives I wasn't living. I used to find comfort in that view. The distance it represented. The glass between me and everything else. Now it just reminded me of all the ways I'd failed to connect.

The bathroom mirror showed me a face I was still learning to recognize.

Not the hollow-eyed ghost I'd been six months ago, thank god. But not quite whole either. Something in between—a man midway through a transformation he wasn't

sure he wanted.

I turned on the shower and waited for the water to heat, watching steam gradually fog the glass. The routine had become ritualistic, a series of small acts that anchored me to the day: shower, medication, breakfast, therapy. Simple steps that Dr. Chaisri had helped me build when the bigger picture felt impossible.

"You don't have to conquer the whole day at once," she'd told me during one of our early sessions. "You just have to survive the next five minutes."

I'd been surviving five minutes at a time for months now. Some days it still felt like too much.

The water was hot enough to sting—I liked it that way, needed the physical sensation to remind me I was present in my body and not floating somewhere above it, watching myself go through the motions. I stood under the spray and let it wash away the residue of another restless night.

The dreams had been getting worse as the exhibition approached. Not nightmares exactly—nothing as dramatic as that. Just a persistent sense of being watched. Of standing in the gallery while faceless figures circled my paintings, their whispers echoing off the walls in a language I couldn't understand. Of reaching for something that kept moving away from me.

Of Est's face, turned away. Always turned away.

I pressed my palms against the tile wall and breathed.

In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.

Dr. Chaisri's voice in my head: "The anxiety is information, not instruction. It's telling you that something matters to you. That's not weakness. That's being alive."

I was alive. I kept having to remind myself of that.

After the shower, I stood in front of my closet—a wardrobe that had expanded significantly since Lego had taken charge of "making sure you don't look like a depression goblin at your own exhibition." His words, not mine.

Today's mission didn't require formal wear. Today was the trial run—a visit to the gallery to familiarize myself with the space before the actual opening. A reconnaissance mission my therapist had suggested, part of the elaborate coping strategy we'd built for the week ahead.

"Your anxiety feeds on uncertainty," Dr. Chaisri had explained. "The more you can predict about the environment, the less fuel you're giving it."

So I was going to walk through the space. Learn the layout. Find the exits. Know

where the bathrooms were, where I could retreat if things became too much, how to navigate from the back entrance to the main gallery without having to cross through crowds.

Preparation. Control. Management.

I pulled on black pants—comfortable, stretchy, the kind I could move easily in if I needed to make a quick escape. A gray shirt, simple and unassuming. Shoes I could run in if necessary. I caught myself choosing clothes based on anxiety rather than aesthetics and had to pause, breathing through the bitter irony of it.

My art was about to be celebrated as the profound expression of a visionary mind, and I was standing in my closet worrying about whether my shoes would impede a potential flight response.

The laugh that escaped me was hollow. But at least I could still laugh.

I grabbed a cap—my hair needed cutting, but the idea of sitting in a salon chair while a stranger touched my head had been too much to contemplate—and a face mask. Disguise and armor and the particular invisibility that had become my default mode of existing in the world.

My medication sat on the bathroom counter, arranged in a neat row of amber bottles that Dr. Chaisri's prescriptions had gradually refined over the months. I took them one by one, the pills bitter against my tongue even with water. This too had become ritual. This too was part of staying alive.

The therapy session was virtual, conducted through the laptop I'd set up on my coffee table. Dr. Chaisri's face filled the screen—kind eyes, the particular patience of someone who had spent decades listening to people fall apart and helping them put themselves back together.

"How are you feeling this morning?" she asked. It was always her first question, and I'd learned not to deflect it.

"Like I'm standing at the edge of a cliff and someone keeps telling me the jump will be fine, but I can see the rocks at the bottom." I said honestly.

She nodded slowly. "What specifically are you afraid of?"

I'd asked myself this question a hundred times. The answer kept changing.

"Everything," I said. "Nothing."

"Be more specific if you can."

I stared at my hands—the same hands that had created the work now hanging in a gallery across the city.

"Being seen," I said. "Being invisible. Being pitied by people who read the artist statements and think they understand what I went through. Being praised for the wrong reasons—for the spectacle of my breakdown rather than the art itself."

"What else?"

"Having a panic attack in front of strangers. Having my father show up." My voice caught slightly. "Having Est look at me and see... nothing. Just a client. Just another job."

Dr. Chaisri was quiet for a moment, giving the words space to exist.

"You've mentioned Est several times in our sessions. The photographer who was commissioned for the exhibition."

"He's more than that." The admission came out rougher than I intended. "He was—we had something. Before I ruined it."

"Tell me about what you ruined."

I closed my eyes. The memories were still raw, even after all this time.

"He was the first person in years who saw me. Really saw me, not just the artist or the brand or the tragic backstory. He came into my apartment to take photographs, and somehow he—he made me feel like I existed. Like I wasn't just a ghost haunting an expensive address."

"That sounds significant."

"It was." I opened my eyes. "And I responded by disappearing on him. When things got overwhelming—when my father decided to sell my mother's house, when the exhibition pressure started building—I stopped communicating. Stopped returning his messages. Let weeks go by in silence."

"Why?"

"Because I was drowning, and I didn't want him to see it. Because I thought if he saw how broken I actually was, he'd leave anyway, and it would be easier if I pushed first." I laughed bitterly. "He confronted me about it. Asked for basic human decency. And I couldn't even give him that."

Dr. Chaisri nodded. "And now?"

"Now he's still contracted to photograph the exhibition. But I don't know if it's enough. I don't know if I've already destroyed whatever we had."

"What do you want to happen?"

The question hung in the air.

"I want him to forgive me," I said quietly. "I want a second chance. I want—" I stopped, overwhelmed by the enormity of wanting something I might not deserve. "I want to be someone who doesn't keep failing the people who care about me."

I looked up at her, my eyes burning. "He sent me a message after I wrote to him. Just a few sentences. Polite. Kind. Professional."

"And that hurt?"

"It hurt more than anger would have." I pressed my palms against my thighs, trying to ground myself. "Anger would have meant he still felt something. Politeness means I'm already filed away. Processed. Dealt with."

"Is that what you believe? That he's finished processing his feelings about you?"

"I believe I don't have the right to ask him to feel anything." My throat tightened. "I believe I don't deserve to hope he still cares. I believe—" I stopped, the words catching.

"What do you believe, William?"

"That I ruined the best thing that ever happened to me because I was too afraid to hold it."

Dr. Chaisri observed. "Let me ask you this: what's the best-case scenario for the exhibition opening? Not the relationship with Est, but the event itself."

I thought about it. "I survive it," I said finally. "I don't have a breakdown. I manage my anxiety well enough that I can actually experience some of it instead of just enduring it. I go home afterward and—"

"And?"

"And I know I did it. That I can do hard things. That I'm not just the ghost who lives in the penthouse."

"That sounds like a reason to try."

I met her eyes through the screen. "It doesn't feel like enough."

"It doesn't have to feel like enough," she said gently. "It just has to feel like a step."

I knew she was right. Intellectually, I knew it. But the gap between intellectual knowledge and emotional acceptance felt vast—a chasm I kept trying to bridge and kept falling into instead.

"What about Est?" I asked. "What do I do if he's there? If he looks at me and I can feel—" I struggled for the right word. "Nothing? What if I look at him and he's just... done with me?"

"What would you do?"

"I don't know. Fall apart, probably. Run. Hide in a bathroom until my manager comes to find me."

"That's one option." Dr. Chaisri's voice was neutral. "What are others?"

"I could—" I paused, thinking. "I could focus on the photography. Not him as a person, but his work. The way he moves. The technical aspects. That's what he'd want, probably. To be seen as a professional."

"That sounds like a coping strategy. What else?"

"I could have Lego with me. As a buffer. Someone to talk to when I need to look at something other than Est's face."

"Good. What else?"

"I could—" This one was harder. "I could accept that whatever he feels is valid. That I don't have the right to control his reactions. That my job is to manage my own responses, not to fix things between us."

"That sounds like a boundary. An important one."

"It sounds like giving up."

"Does it?" Dr. Chaisri leaned forward slightly. "Or does it sound like accepting reality? You can't control Est's feelings. You can't make him forgive you faster than he's ready to. All you can do is show up as the version of yourself you're working to become—and let him decide what to do with that information."

Show up. That was the whole thing, really. The heart of what I'd been working toward for months. Not grand gestures or dramatic reconciliations. Just showing up. Being present. Doing the small, unglamorous work of existing in the world.

"What if showing up isn't enough?"

"Enough for what?"

"Enough to—" I couldn't finish the sentence. The hope was too fragile to name.

Dr. Chaisri was quiet for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was gentle.

"William. What you're describing—the desire for Est to see you differently, to feel differently about you—that's understandable. But it's not something you can achieve by performing wellness at an exhibition. Real reconnection, if it's ever going to happen, will come from sustained change. From showing up not just once, but over and over. From being someone Est can trust again."

"And if he never trusts me again?"

"Then you'll have to find a way to live with that. To grieve it properly, instead of letting it fester." She paused. "But that's not a conversation for today. Today, we're preparing for Friday. Today, we're building your toolkit for surviving the exhibition. The rest—the Est question, the relationship question—that comes after."

After. The word felt impossibly distant. I couldn't imagine an after. Couldn't imagine the exhibition being over, the adrenaline fading, the return to ordinary days. All I could see was Friday, looming like a wall I had to climb.

"Okay," I said. "Let's talk about the toolkit."

The apartment felt different after therapy. Emptier, somehow. The shadows seemed longer, the silence heavier. I moved through the space slowly, each step deliberate, trying to stay present in my body instead of disappearing into my head.

After the session, I sat on my couch and stared at the walls. The apartment was too empty. Not physically—Lego had helped me organize it over the past months, replacing chaos with order, filling the spaces with evidence of a life being actively lived rather than just survived. But emotionally, the silence felt heavy. Full of all the conversations I'd been too scared to have.

I thought about Est. I thought about him constantly, actually—it was a problem. His face would appear unbidden while I was eating breakfast, while I was painting, while I was trying to sleep. Those green eyes that saw too much. The way his hands moved when he talked about photography, precise and passionate. The particular quality of his silence when he was concentrating, the way he could disappear behind his camera while somehow remaining completely present.

I wanted to be proud. I wanted to feel the accomplishment she was describing. But all I felt was tired, and scared, and the particular ache that came from knowing that no amount of progress would undo what I'd done to Est.

Some damage couldn't be repaired. It could only be survived.

I thought about the person I'd been six months ago. The one who couldn't answer emails, couldn't make phone calls, couldn't do anything except paint and sleep and wait for Lego to bring flowers. The one who had kissed Est and then retreated, terrified by the intimacy of being seen. That person felt distant now. Not gone—I could still feel him inside me, crouching in the dark corners, waiting to resurface—but distant. Smaller. Like a voice in a crowd instead of the only voice in the room.

Progress. Real progress.

The words felt hollow. But maybe that was okay. Maybe progress didn't have to feel

triumphant. Maybe it could feel tired and scared and uncertain, and still be real.

My phone buzzed. A text from Lego:

Outside the building! Ready when you are.

I looked at the message for a long moment. My hands were shaking slightly—the particular tremor that always preceded ventures into the outside world. But Lego was waiting, and I'd promised, and today was about preparation, about control, about doing hard things. I grabbed my cap and mask, took one last steadying breath, and headed for the door.

You're coping, I told myself. You're using the tools. You're doing everything right.

But "right" felt like such a low bar. Like celebrating the fact that I'd managed to feed myself, dress myself, medicate myself. Basic survival, nothing more.

The lobby was bright and modern, all glass and chrome and the particular cold elegance of expensive architecture. I'd lived in this building for three years and still felt like an intruder in this space—watched by security cameras, tracked by doormen who knew I almost never left.

Lego was standing near the entrance, and the sight of him eased something in my chest. He looked beautiful, as always. A short, thin light blue vest over a white t-shirt, a black skirt that swirled when he moved, white socks and black Mary Jane shoes that made him look simultaneously sophisticated and impossibly young. His hair was pulled into a bun, shorter strands escaping around his face and held back by pastel-colored clips that caught the fluorescent light. But what caught my attention—what made me pause mid-step—was the large knee brace he was wearing on his right leg.

"Lego." I crossed the remaining distance to him, concern cutting through my anxiety. "Your knee—"

"It's fine." He waved a dismissive hand, but I could see the particular stiffness in how he was standing. "The doctor said—"

"What did the doctor say?"

"That I need to be careful for a few weeks." He took my arm, linking his through mine with the easy physical affection that had always defined our friendship. "P'Will, I'm fine. Really. Let's focus on you today."

I wanted to argue, wanted to insist we cancel this trial run so he could rest, wanted to wrap him in cotton wool and protect him from all the ways he pushed himself too hard. But I also knew Lego—knew that arguing would only make him more stubborn, that he'd shown up today specifically to support me, and that turning this into a discussion about his knee would feel like rejection.



So I let it go. For now.

"You look good," I said instead. "The clips are new."

His face brightened. "P'Nut gave them to me. Said they matched my 'aesthetic.'" He made air quotes around the word, laughing. "P'Hong was very embarrassed."

I felt myself smile—a real smile, small but genuine. Lego had that effect on me. Always had. Even during the worst of my isolation, his Wednesday visits had been points of light in the darkness. The sunflowers he brought, the cheerful chatter that asked for nothing in return, the simple fact of his presence proving that I hadn't been entirely forgotten.

I'd failed him too. Pushed him away when Est entered the picture, let my own confused feelings create distance between us. But Lego had stayed. Had kept showing up. Had waited for me to find my way back. I didn't deserve his loyalty. But I was trying to become someone who did.

"You shouldn't be walking across the city for me. You should be resting."

"P'Will." Lego's voice was gentle but firm. "I've been resting for days. If I rest any more, I'm going to lose my mind. Besides—" They reached out and took my arm, leaning into me slightly. "You need me. And I'm not letting you do this alone."

The contact helped. Their weight against my arm, the warmth of them, the particular comfort of physical proximity. My racing heart began to slow.

"I'm glad you're here." I admitted quietly.

"Where else would I be?"

With Tui, I thought but didn't say. With your friends. With anyone except the person who spent years taking you for granted.

But Lego was here. Despite everything, despite the years of one-sided caretaking, despite the ways I'd failed them—they were here. And I was learning, slowly, to accept that instead of questioning it.

The driver was waiting in the parking garage—My manager was already in the passenger seat—her suit impeccable, her expression professionally neutral, her phone pressed to her ear as she finished a call. She was always working. Always managing something. The machinery of my career never stopped, even when I did.

"William." She nodded as I climbed into the back seat with Lego. "Lego. Good morning."

"Good morning." Lego's voice was bright but respectful. He'd always been good with

authority figures—a skill born, I suspected, from years of navigating adults who didn't quite know what to make of him.

"How are you feeling?" she asked me directly. "Honestly."

"Terrified," I admitted. It was becoming easier to say that word out loud. "But committed."

"Good. Terror can be managed. Avoidance cannot." She turned to face the front as the driver pulled out of the garage. "The gallery director will meet us at the back entrance. We'll have about an hour before they need to finish setup for another event this evening. That should be enough time to familiarize yourself with the space."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. I wanted to laugh. I was wearing a face mask and a cap, hiding as much of myself as possible while technically being visible. But "good" was relative, I supposed. I'd showered. I'd dressed. I was vertical and conscious. For me, that was achievement.

Lego's hand found mine and squeezed gently. I held on like a lifeline.

The driver opened the back door. Lego slid in first, moving carefully to accommodate the knee brace, and I followed. The leather seats were cool, the interior air-conditioned to combat Bangkok's heat. The car was one of those sleek black vehicles that screamed money and discretion—the kind my family had always used for public appearances. The sensation was strange—the motion, the sound of the engine, the way the city passed by outside the tinted windows like a film I was watching rather than a reality I was part of. My manager talked to the driver. Something about route, about timing, about the logistics of the trial run. I let the words wash over me, grateful for the buffer of her voice, for the way she filled the silence so I didn't have to.

Lego's hand found mine. I looked down at our intertwined fingers—their hand smaller than mine, their grip firm despite the trembling I could feel underneath. They were nervous too. Had been nervous for days, though they hid it better than I did. The weight of my exhibition was pressing on them as much as it pressed on me.

"Thank you," I said quietly. "For doing this."

"It's just a car ride."

"It's not. It's—" I struggled to find the words. "It's holding me up. It's being here when you could be anywhere else. It's choosing to support me even though I—"

"P'William." Lego's voice was soft but stopped me completely. "We've been over this. I'm not here because I feel obligated. I'm here because I want to be. Because you're important to me. Because watching you get better has been—" They paused,

something complicated moving across their face. "It's been healing for me too. Seeing that change is possible."

I didn't deserve that grace. Didn't deserve the forgiveness implicit in their presence. But I was learning not to argue with kindness—learning to accept it instead of pushing it away.

"How's Tui?" I asked, changing the subject to something safer.

Lego's face changed. Softened in a way that made my chest ache with something that wasn't quite jealousy—more like recognition. I knew what it looked like when Lego was thinking about someone they loved. I'd seen it directed at me, once, in a different way.

"He's good." Their voice carried warmth. "He's been—really supportive. About the knee, about the showcase, about all of it. He's different than I expected."

"Different how?"

"Steady." Lego considered the word. "Not like—not like how I thought people were. I thought relationships were about always being bright, always being useful, always being the thing the other person needed. But Tui doesn't need me to be anything. He just wants me to be me."

The observation landed somewhere deep.

That's what Est tried to offer me, I thought. The chance to be myself, instead of performing a version of myself. And I couldn't accept it.

"That sounds healthy." I managed.

"It's terrifying." Lego laughed, but there was truth underneath. "I keep waiting for the catch. Waiting to find out what I have to do to earn it. But there isn't a catch. He just—loves me. Badly, imperfectly, but honestly."

"You deserve that."

"So do you." Lego met my eyes. "You know that, right? You deserve someone who sees you and stays."

I looked out the window. The city was passing by—buildings and traffic and the endless motion of lives that didn't belong to me.

"I had that," I said quietly. "I pushed it away."

"Est?"

The name sent a pulse of pain through my chest. "He'll be at the exhibition. Photographing it. I don't know how to—" I stopped, unable to articulate the tangle of

feelings.

"You don't have to know how to," Lego said gently. "You just have to show up. The rest will happen or it won't. You can't control what Est feels."

"I know."

"But?"

"But I want to control it." The admission felt shameful. "I want to fix things. I want him to look at me and see—I don't know. Something worth looking at. Something that isn't the person who hurt him."

"That takes time, P'Will. More time than one exhibition."

"What if we don't have time? What if this is it—the one chance, the one opportunity—and I mess it up again?"

Lego was quiet for a moment. Then they squeezed my hand.

"Then you'll mess it up," they said simply. "And you'll survive it. And you'll try again, when the next opportunity comes. That's what healing looks like. Not getting everything right the first time—just getting up after you fall."

The drive took twenty minutes—twenty minutes of watching the city scroll past through tinted windows, trying to breathe through the tightness in my chest. Bangkok moved around us in its endless chaos of traffic and noise and life, completely indifferent to my internal catastrophe.

"P'Wil." Lego's voice was soft. "You're doing great."

"I'm sitting in a car."

"You're sitting in a car that's taking you to a gallery where your art is about to be shown to the world." He squeezed my hand again. "Three months ago, you couldn't leave your apartment. Remember? When I tried to get you to come to the flower shop and you had a panic attack just thinking about it?"

I remembered. The memory wasn't pleasant—the walls closing in, the certainty that if I stepped outside, something terrible would happen, the hours spent afterward shaking on my bathroom floor.

"This is different."

"Is it?"

"Yes." I looked at him. "I'm still terrified. But I'm doing it anyway."

His smile was radiant. "That's called courage, P'Will."

"It doesn't feel like courage. It feels like nausea."

"Sometimes they feel the same."

I almost laughed. Almost.

The gallery came into view—The gallery was modern. Three stories of glass and concrete, the kind of architecture that announced itself without apology. I'd seen photos—my manager had sent them, along with floor plans and lighting specifications—but seeing it in person was different.

This was where my paintings would hang. Where strangers would stand in front of my grief and form opinions about it. Where critics would write reviews and collectors would make decisions and the whole machinery of the art world would churn around work I'd made in the darkest moments of my life.

The thought was paralyzing.

"We're here," My manager announced, as if I couldn't tell by the way my heart had started trying to escape through my throat. "We're going through the back entrance, The assistant will meet us and give you a tour of the space."

"Just the space," I confirmed. "I don't want to—I'm not ready to see many people yet."

"Just the space," she agreed. "Today is just you and the paintings."

The driver pulled around to the back, where a service entrance waited with notably fewer witnesses than the main doors would have offered. Small mercies. An assistant was already outside—a young man with an eager expression and a clipboard, the universal marker of someone lower in the hierarchy who'd been tasked with making visitors feel important.

Getting out of the car felt monumental. My legs didn't want to cooperate. The medication was working—I could feel its presence like a film between me and my anxiety—but it wasn't magic. The fear was still there, just muffled.

Lego stepped out first, their hand immediately reaching back for mine.

I took it. Let them anchor me.

We walked toward the entrance.

"Mr. Jakrapatr." He bowed slightly as I exited the car. "Welcome. I'm the gallery's event coordinator, the director, is waiting inside."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. Lego had emerged beside me, and I was acutely aware of the way he positioned himself at my elbow—close enough to support, far enough to give me space. He'd learned my rhythms over years of friendship, knew when I needed proximity and when I needed room to breathe.

The back hallways of galleries were never meant for visitors. They were functional spaces—storage rooms, offices, the particular chaos that existed behind every polished public face. I found it oddly comforting. This was the messy, human reality that supported the perfect gallery experience. Proof that beauty required work.

The assistant led us through the maze of corridors, explaining things I didn't retain—shipping details, insurance paperwork, the logistics of mounting and lighting that my team had handled without my involvement.

I let the words wash over me.

We turned a corner.

The back entrance was blessedly simple—a plain door, a short hallway, staff offices that we passed quickly. And then—The gallery.

The space opened up around me like a breath. High ceilings, white walls, natural light pouring through windows that stretched from floor to ceiling. The architecture was designed to disappear, to make itself a container for whatever art it held rather than competing for attention. And there, covering the walls, were my paintings.

I stopped walking. Couldn't move. Lego's hand found my elbow, steadying me. The coordinator was saying something about lighting angles and crowd flow, but his voice had become distant, underwater. All I could see were the canvases.

The chaos pieces from my breakdown—the violent yellows and crimsons, the slashed blues, the fury and grief rendered visible. The portrait series of Lego, gentler than the chaos work but no less honest, capturing years of his transformations. The abstracted landscapes that weren't landscapes at all but emotional topographies, maps of internal territories I'd never shown anyone.

And the centerpiece: the heart breaking open.

The largest canvas dominated the main wall, impossible to miss. It was the painting I'd made during the worst night of my breakdown, when my father's text about selling my mother's house had shattered whatever was left of my control. I'd attacked the canvas for hours, painting until my arms ached and my vision blurred and the smell of oil was so thick I could barely breathe.

The result was chaos made visible. But it was also true. More true than anything I'd made before.

They hung on pristine white walls, lit by the particular gallery lighting that made

everything look important. Dozens of them. Months of work. The chaos and grief and love I'd poured onto canvas, now arranged in careful sequence, transformed from private catharsis into public spectacle.

I stopped walking.

Absence & Light. The exhibition title hung at the entrance to the main gallery, the words in elegant script on a banner that would greet every visitor.

"William." My manager's, gentle but firm. "Take your time. But you should see the whole space."

I made myself move.

The gallery was arranged chronologically—or at least, that's what the wall text would claim. In reality, the arrangement followed emotional arcs, the rise and fall of grief's tide. Visitors would enter through quieter works, be drawn toward the center where the chaos pieces clustered, then be released into the final section where something almost like hope began to emerge.

The descriptions beside each painting were ones I'd agonized over for weeks. Words that tried to explain without explaining too much, that offered context without dictating interpretation. They mentioned my mother's death, my isolation, my ongoing treatment. They were more honest than anything I'd ever written for public consumption.

And they terrified me as much as the paintings themselves.

It looked different here. In my studio, it had been intimate—a private conversation between me and the canvas. Here, under gallery lighting, surrounded by white walls and careful spacing, it became something else. Something public. Something that strangers would stand in front of, forming judgments, making meanings, deciding whether I was brilliant or pretentious or simply broken.

"The projector will cycle through additional images," The assistant was explaining, gesturing toward a screen on the far wall. "Archival photographs, sketches, developmental work. The supplementary materials you provided."

I nodded distantly. Lego was examining the seating arrangements—chairs, armchairs, and long benches positioned throughout the space to encourage lingering. Everything was designed to make visitors comfortable, to give them permission to stay, to look, to feel.

I wondered how many of them would understand. How many would see the truth buried in the brushstrokes, the particular shade of grief that had gone into every color choice. And how many would simply admire the technical skill, offer superficial praise, move on to the next exhibition without any understanding of what it had

cost to create.

Did it matter? Should it matter?

"P'Wil." Lego appeared at my side, his expression soft. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." The honesty was automatic now—a muscle I'd been building in therapy. "It's overwhelming. Seeing it all here."

"It's beautiful." His voice was sincere. "All of it. The chaos pieces especially. They feel—" He searched for the word. "Alive. Like something that's still happening instead of something that already happened."

"That's what I was afraid of."

"Why?"

"Because it means people will see how not-okay I actually was. Am. Whatever."

Lego took my hand again. "P'Wil. That's the whole point. The exhibition is called Absence & Light. It's about the dark and the bright and everything in between. People are supposed to see the struggle. That's what makes it real."

I wanted to believe him. Wanted to trust that vulnerability would be received as strength rather than weakness, that honesty would be valued rather than exploited. But I'd been hiding for three years. The idea of being seen—truly seen, by strangers who had no stake in my wellbeing—felt like standing naked in a hurricane.

We walked the entire space twice, mapping exits and bathrooms and quiet corners where I could retreat if necessary. My manager discussed logistics: where I would stand during the opening, how long I was expected to be present, the signal I could give her if I needed extraction.

"You don't have to stay for the entire event," she reminded me. "Your speech at the opening, a reasonable amount of time for photographs and brief interactions, and then you can leave. We'll manage the rest."

"What about Est?" The name escaped before I could stop it. "The photographer. Will he be there?"

My manager consulted her tablet. "Est Supha Sangaworawong is contracted for opening night coverage, yes. He'll be documenting the event as part of the exhibition's promotional materials."

I nodded, trying to keep my expression neutral.

Est would be there. Camera in hand, watching through the lens, professional and



distant and everything I'd made him by pushing him away. He would photograph me in my own space, surrounded by my own art, and I would have to pretend that didn't shatter me. Or maybe I wouldn't pretend. Maybe the whole point of this exhibition—the whole point of everything I'd been working toward in therapy—was to stop pretending.

"P'Will?" Lego's voice pulled me back to the present. "You're doing that thing where you disappear into your head."

"Sorry." I made myself focus. "Just thinking."

I looked at him sharply. Lego's expression was gentle, knowing—he'd always seen more than I wanted him to.

"I don't know what to do about him," I admitted. "I don't know how to—I don't know if there's anything left to salvage."

"Have you tried talking to him?"

I thought about all the things I wanted to say to Est. The apologies, the explanations, the desperate hope that maybe, somehow, I hadn't destroyed everything. But every time I imagined having that conversation, the words dried up in my throat. What could I possibly say that would be enough?

"He deserves better than me," I said quietly. "Better than someone who disappears when things get hard."

"Maybe." Lego's voice was even. "But that's his decision to make, not yours."

I didn't have a response to that.

"Can I walk through alone?" I asked. "Just—a few minutes."

My manager nodded, professional as always. "We'll wait in the lobby. Take your time."

Lego squeezed my arm before letting go. And then I was alone with my paintings.

The gallery was silent. Not the dead silence of my apartment—that particular quiet that pressed in on all sides, that reminded me constantly of my isolation. This was different. A curated silence. The kind that existed in museums and cathedrals, spaces designed to make people stop and pay attention.

I walked slowly through the first room.

The early paintings were hard to look at. They were the ones I'd made in the worst of it—after my mother died, after I'd retreated into the penthouse, after I'd stopped

being a person and started being a ghost. Dark colors. Fragmented images. The particular violence of grief that couldn't find any other outlet.

There was one of my mother's house. Not the real house—a distorted version, walls dissolving, rooms bleeding into each other. The mango tree in the garden hung upside down, its roots clawing at a sky that was the wrong color. Her café chairs floated in void.

I remembered painting it. The particular frenzy of that night, my hands moving faster than my mind, the canvas becoming a repository for everything I couldn't say.

She's gone, the painting said. And the world doesn't make sense anymore.

I moved to the next room.

These were the paintings from the middle period—the years of stagnation, when I'd continued making work but couldn't find the energy to show it to anyone. More controlled than the early pieces, more technically accomplished, but also more distant. I'd been learning to manage my grief, which meant learning to numb it. The paintings reflected that numbness.

Lego appeared in several of them.—Yellow for the sunflowers they brought. Pink for the particular shade of lipstick they sometimes wore. The bright colors that interrupted the gray, that reminded me there was still beauty in the world even when I couldn't feel it.

And then the final room.

This was the work from the past year. The paintings I'd made after meeting Est. After something had cracked open inside me.

Having Est look at me and see nothing. Just a client.

That was my fear. That I'd become invisible to him. That whatever we'd had—whatever fragile, precious thing had been building between us—had been so thoroughly destroyed by my silence that it couldn't be recovered.

Maybe it couldn't.

Maybe I'd used up all my chances.

But I was here. That had to mean something. I'd left my apartment, faced my fear, walked through a gallery that felt like walking through my own ribcage exposed to the world.

If showing up was all I could do, at least I was doing it.

The walk back through the gallery felt different. Longer, somehow. I was moving through my own history, past all the pain I'd processed and all the pain I was still processing. Each painting was a moment. Each canvas was a choice I'd made, a feeling I'd felt, a piece of myself I was about to share with strangers. This is what being seen looks like, I thought. Not just the beautiful parts. All of it. The mess and the grief and the slow, unglamorous work of becoming human again.

Lego was waiting in the lobby.

They stood up immediately when they saw me, their face shifting through concern to relief. "How was it?"

"Hard." I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. "But okay. It's—strange, seeing it all together. Realizing how much has changed."

"Good strange or bad strange?"

"I don't know yet." I moved to stand beside them. "Ask me again after Friday."

We left the gallery through the same back entrance we'd used to arrive. The driver was waiting, My manager was already on her phone handling some other crisis, and Lego was limping slightly despite his insistence that his knee was fine.

"You need to rest that," I said as we settled into the car. "Properly rest. Not rest while running errands for me."

"It's fine, P'Will."

"It's not fine if you're limping."

"The doctor said six weeks of reduced activity. It's been four. I'm being careful."

"Is that what this morning was? Careful?"

He sighed, but there was fondness in it. "I wanted to be here. For you. This is important."

"You're important too."

The words hung in the air between us. I'd said them before, of course—or some variation. But lately, I'd been trying to be more explicit about the things I felt. Dr. Chaisri said that unspoken appreciation was nearly as useless as no appreciation at all. That relationships required maintenance, active investment, the willingness to articulate what you assumed the other person already knew.

Lego's smile was soft. "I know, P'Will. I know."

I stared out the window and thought about Est. He'd be at the opening. I'd confirmed it with my manager—his company was handling the photography, and he was the lead photographer for the project. He'd be there with his camera, documenting everything, capturing the moment my three years of hiding ended. And I had no idea what to say to him.

Thank you felt inadequate. I'm sorry felt repetitive—I'd already apologized in my letter, already admitted my failures. I miss you felt like asking for something I had no right to want.

Maybe I wouldn't say anything. Maybe I'd just—exist in the same space as him, breathing the same air, hoping that proximity could communicate what words couldn't. Or maybe I'd panic. Fall apart. Run to a bathroom and hide until someone came to collect me.

Either way, Friday was coming. And I was as ready as I was going to be.

My phone buzzed during the drive back. I glanced at the screen reflexively and felt my stomach drop.

Dad.

I hadn't read his messages in weeks. Every time his name appeared, I muted the notification without looking, unable to face whatever cold instruction or casual dismissal was waiting inside. Now his name sat on my screen, demanding attention. I stared at it for a long moment, then deliberately turned the phone face-down on my lap.

Not today. Maybe not ever. But definitely not today.

"P'Will?" Lego had noticed my expression change.

"My father." I didn't elaborate. I didn't need to.

Lego was quiet for a moment. Then, carefully: "Are you going to read it?"

"No."

"Okay."

That was it. No judgment, no pressure, no opinion about what I should or shouldn't do about my complicated relationship with my remaining parent. Just acceptance of my choice in that moment. It was one of the things I loved most about Lego. He knew when to push and when to simply be present.

Back at my apartment, the afternoon stretched ahead like an open question. Lego insisted on making tea—the blooming kind, the flowers that unfurled in hot water

like small miracles. He'd taught me to appreciate these moments of deliberate beauty, the way slowing down for ritual could anchor a scattered mind.

We sat on my couch, watching the flower expand in the glass teapot.

"Four days." I said.

"Four days." he agreed.

"I don't know if I'm ready."

"You'll never feel ready. That's not how anxiety works." He tucked his legs underneath him, careful of the braced knee. "But you're more prepared than you were. More than you think."

"What if I have a breakdown in the middle of it?"

"Then you have a breakdown. And I'm there. And your manager is there. And we get you out, and we take care of you, and you try again another day."

"It sounds so simple when you say it."

"It is simple. Not easy, but simple." He reached over and squeezed my hand.

"You've survived everything that's happened to you so far. Every bad day, every panic attack, every time you thought you couldn't continue. You're still here. That's not nothing."

I looked at him—this boy who had grown up alongside my own deterioration, who had watched me withdraw from the world and never stopped showing up. He'd been seventeen when my isolation began. Now he was twenty, with his own life, his own ambitions, his own struggles that he rarely let anyone see. And he was still here, in my apartment, holding my hand, helping me prepare for something that terrified us both.

"Why do you stay?" The question emerged before I could stop it. "After everything. After I pushed you away for Est, after I ignored your calls, after all the times I've failed you. Why are you still here?"

Lego was quiet for a long moment. His expression was thoughtful, not hurt—he'd been expecting the question, maybe. Had been waiting for me to finally ask.

"Because I love you," he said simply. "You're family to me. You're—" He searched for the words. "When my parents forgot about me, your mother didn't. She took me in, fed me, let me spend hours in your kitchen learning to cook and your garden learning about flowers. And when she died, I couldn't lose you too. Even when you were trying to lose yourself."

My throat was tight. I couldn't speak.

"You think you failed me," Lego continued. "But P'Will—I failed you too. I saw you spiraling and I kept bringing flowers instead of insisting you get help. I enabled the isolation because it was easier than confronting it. We both could have done better."

"You were a teenager."

"So were you, when your mom got sick. Being young doesn't mean we weren't making choices." He shrugged. "But we're here now. Different. Trying to be better. That's all anyone can do."

I reached over and pulled him into a hug—careful of his knee, but tight enough to communicate everything I couldn't say. He melted into it, his small body solid against mine.

"Thank you." I managed.

"For what?"

"For not giving up."

"Never," he said. "Not ever."

After Lego left, the apartment felt emptier than usual. I stood in front of the window, watching the city transition from afternoon to evening. The lights came on in distant buildings, little fires against the gathering dark. Somewhere out there, Est was probably editing photographs, or eating dinner, or lying in his own apartment staring at his own ceiling.

I wondered if he thought about me the way I thought about him. If I haunted his quiet moments the way he haunted mine.

Probably not. I'd given him every reason to move on. The silence, the distance, the inability to communicate even when he was standing right in front of me asking for basic human decency. Why would he waste his energy on someone who'd treated him like that?

I'd painted him because I couldn't stop thinking about him.

I'd painted him because his hands, holding a camera, adjusting a lens, gesturing while he talked about light—his hands had been the first beautiful thing I'd let myself notice in years. The first thing that made me want to create again, not just endure.

And I'd pushed him away because I was terrified of what that meant. Terrified of needing someone. Terrified of being known, of being loved, of having something to lose.

My phone sat on the coffee table where I'd left it, still face-down, still carrying my father's unread message. But there were other messages too—the ones I'd sent to Est during our professional sessions. Brief, businesslike confirmations. Nothing that acknowledged what we'd once been to each other, or what I'd hoped we might become.

I picked up the phone. Scrolled to our conversation.

The last exchange was from yesterday: confirmation of timings for opening night photography, discussion of equipment requirements. Purely transactional. The words of two professionals who happened to have history.

I started typing.

I've been thinking about—

Deleted it.

I wanted to say—

Deleted it.

Est—

Deleted it.

I set the phone down again. The cursor blinked at me, waiting for words I couldn't find.

Maybe the exhibition would say what I couldn't. Maybe my hands holding that rose, rendered in gray and blue, would communicate everything my voice kept failing to express. Or maybe it wouldn't. Maybe he'd see the painting and feel nothing. Maybe he'd photograph it with the same detached professionalism he'd brought to every session since our falling out. Maybe whatever we'd once had was already gone, and all I was doing was torturing myself with possibilities that no longer existed.

The not-knowing was the worst part. Dr. Chaisri said that uncertainty was intolerable to anxious minds—we craved resolution, even negative resolution, over the endless ambiguity of waiting. But some things couldn't be rushed. Some answers could only be discovered through time and presence and the willingness to show up even when you weren't sure what you'd find.

Four days. Ninety-six hours. Then I would stand in a room full of my own grief while Est pointed a camera at me, and we would both have to reckon with whatever remained between us.

I wasn't ready.

But I was going to do it anyway.

I made dinner. Nothing elaborate—rice, vegetables, the simple food I'd been eating since I started trying to take care of myself. The act of cooking was grounding, physical, something to do with my hands while my mind raced.

Three days until the exhibition. I'd done the trial run. I knew the route, the space, the way the gallery felt. I had my coping strategies written on an index card in my pocket. I had Lego, and my manager, and the medication that kept the worst of the anxiety at bay.

But I didn't have Est.

The thought landed with a particular weight.

I'd been thinking of the exhibition as a test—proof that I could do hard things, that I wasn't permanently broken. But maybe that framing was wrong. Maybe it wasn't about proving anything. Maybe it was just about showing up.

And maybe showing up wasn't enough to fix things with Est. Maybe nothing would be enough. Maybe I'd used up all my chances, and the rest of my life would be lived in the space of his absence, reaching for something that wasn't there. But I was going to show up anyway.

Because that was all I could do. Because the alternative—hiding forever, letting fear win—felt like a kind of death. Because even if Est never forgave me, even if I spent the rest of my life watching him from across rooms, unable to bridge the distance I'd created—at least I would know I tried. At least I would know I was capable of trying.

That night, I dreamed of my mother's garden.

The sunflowers were impossibly tall, blocking out the sky. I walked between them, searching for something I couldn't name, my hands trailing across their rough stems. The air smelled of dirt and growth and the particular sweetness of flowers in full bloom.

She was there—my mother, younger than I'd last seen her, before the illness had hollowed her out. She was kneeling in the garden bed, hands deep in the soil, humming something I almost recognized.

"Mom." My voice came out like a child's.

She looked up. Smiled. The kind of smile that made everything feel possible.

"You're doing so well," she said. "I'm proud of you."

"I'm scared."

"I know. That's okay. Fear is just love in disguise—love of what you might lose, love



of what you hope to gain." She stood, brushing dirt from her knees. "You've been hiding for so long, baby. It's time to let them see you."

"What if they don't like what they see?"

"Then they don't like it. But at least they'll see the truth. And there's always someone who needs the truth you have to tell."

I wanted to say more—wanted to ask her about the house, about the exhibition, about Est, about all the ways I'd managed to fail while trying to survive her loss. But dreams don't work that way. The garden was already fading, the sunflowers dissolving into morning light.

"Mom—"

"I love you," she said, her voice distant now, echoing. "I always will. Now go be brave."

I woke with tears on my face, but they weren't sad tears. They were the kind that came from being touched by something true, even if it only existed in dreams. From hearing words I needed to hear, even if they came from my own subconscious rather than any external source.

Go be brave.

I could do this.

I had to do this.

Not for the critics, not for the sales, not for any of the art world machinations that my manager would be orchestrating behind the scenes. But for myself. To prove that three years of isolation hadn't destroyed me. That I was still capable of standing in a room full of people and existing, imperfectly but honestly, without hiding behind glass walls.

And maybe, if I was very lucky, to show Est that I was trying to become someone different. Someone better. Someone who deserved a second chance, even if he chose not to give one.

I got out of bed. Made coffee. Took my medication.

The morning light was soft through my windows, painting the walls in shades of gold.

Three more days of preparation. Three more days to practice my breathing, review my coping strategies, finalize the speech I would give at the opening.

Three more days until Absence & Light began.

I was terrified.

But I was also, impossibly, almost ready.

On the morning of the following day, Lego showed up with garment bags.

"Outfit options," he announced, depositing them on my couch with the authority of someone who had been planning this intervention for weeks. "You are not wearing something you already own to your first major exhibition in three years."

"What's wrong with what I already own?"

"Depression wardrobe." He unzipped the first bag to reveal a charcoal suit, impeccably tailored. "You've been buying clothes based on how easy they are to hide in. This is not a hiding event."

I looked at the suit. It was beautiful—understated but clearly expensive, the kind of thing that said serious artist without trying too hard. The fabric had a subtle texture that would photograph well.

"When did you—"

"Tui helped." Lego pulled out a second bag containing a deep blue dress shirt. "And Nut has surprisingly good taste in formal wear."

I stared at him. "You got Tui and Nut involved in dressing me?"

"It takes a village to un-depress a wardrobe." He held the shirt up against my chest, squinting critically. "This color will make your eyes pop. Est won't be able to look away."

"Lego—"

"What? I'm just saying. If you're going to be vulnerable in public, you might as well look good doing it."

I couldn't help but laugh—a real laugh, surprised out of me by his shameless scheming. "You're impossible."

"I'm efficient." He grinned. "Try it on. We need to make sure it fits."

I changed in the bathroom, feeling slightly ridiculous about the whole situation. But when I emerged wearing the suit, the shirt, the carefully chosen accessories Lego had brought—

The person in the mirror looked like someone who had their life together. Someone confident and polished and ready to face the world. It was a lie, of course. Inside, I

was still the same terrified mess I'd been for years. But maybe that was okay. Maybe appearances could be armor, could give you courage you didn't quite possess, could help you fake it until the faking became real.

"Perfect." Lego circled me, adjusting the collar, smoothing a nonexistent wrinkle. "You look like an artist who is about to take the art world by storm."

"I look like someone who let their tiny friend dress them."

"Also accurate." He beamed at me. "Est is going to die when he sees you."

"That's not the goal."

"It's a little bit the goal."

I sighed, but I was smiling. "Thank you. For this. For everything."

"You can thank me by not having a breakdown at your own exhibition."

"I make no promises."

"Fair enough." He stepped back, surveying his work with satisfaction. "Two more days, P'Wil. You've got this."

The days before my exhibition didn't pass so much as accumulate—each one adding weight to the pile already pressing down on my chest. I woke each morning with the same thought: Five days. Four days. Three. The countdown running in my head like a metronome, steady and relentless, marking the rhythm of my approaching doom.

Or triumph. I was supposed to call it triumph now. That's what Dr. Chaisri kept reminding me.

The apartment felt different as the date approached. Emptier, somehow, even though nothing had changed. The paintings that had cluttered my studio for months were gone—transported to the gallery three weeks ago, wrapped in protective paper and carried away by careful hands while I watched from the doorway, unable to follow them. They'd been part of my space for so long that their absence felt like missing teeth. Gaps where something should be.

I kept finding myself standing in the studio, staring at the empty walls, trying to remember what had hung where. The chaos of those frantic nights—canvas after canvas pulled from the stack, paint flying, fingers cracking with dried color—felt distant now. Like something that had happened to someone else. But it hadn't. It had happened to me. And now those paintings—those raw, ugly, honest paintings—were hanging in a gallery across the city, waiting for strangers to examine them.

Waiting for Est to photograph them.

Est.

His name was a bruise I couldn't stop pressing. Every time I thought I'd moved past it, something would remind me—a particular quality of light, a photograph in a magazine, the way someone held a camera in a commercial—and the ache would flare fresh.

I'd written him a letter. Sent him a painting. Received a response that was kind but careful: Thank you. Nothing that promised forgiveness. Nothing that closed the door entirely. Just... acknowledgment. The particular mercy of someone who had decided not to hate you but wasn't ready to let you back in.

I understood. I deserved far worse than careful kindness. But understanding didn't stop the wanting. Didn't stop the way my chest tightened whenever I thought about seeing him at the exhibition—camera raised, professional distance in place, treating me like any other client. Didn't stop the fear that he'd look at me and see nothing. That I'd become invisible to the one person who had ever really seen me.

Two more days became one more day.

And one more day became the night before.

I didn't sleep.

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling crack that had been my companion through so many restless nights, and I let my mind run through every possible catastrophe. The panic attack I might have in front of strangers. The critics who might tear my work apart. My father, somehow appearing to ruin everything. Est, looking through me like I wasn't there. But beneath the catastrophizing, there was something else. A quiet determination that Dr. Chaisri had been helping me build for months.

I had prepared. I had strategies. I had people who cared about me stationed throughout the event, ready to help if things went wrong.

And more importantly: I had reasons to try. Reasons that had nothing to do with success or failure, with critics or sales, with anything external to myself.

I wanted to prove that I could do hard things.

I wanted to honor my mother's memory by creating something honest about grief.

I wanted to show Est that I was working on becoming different.

I wanted to stop being a ghost.

The morning came eventually, as mornings always do. Gray light filtering through curtains, the city waking up, the particular sounds of a new day beginning. I got out of bed. Showered. Took my medication. Made coffee with hands that shook only

slightly. And I let myself hope—fragile, tentative, easily shattered—that maybe, somehow, this would be the beginning of something instead of just another ending.

I was ready.

Or close enough to ready that the difference didn't matter.